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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

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# Exegesis and Exposition\*

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LET US BEGIN by setting our biblical studies in the context of the general history of human thought. The history of human thought is the history of man learning to grow in more accurate knowledge and deeper understanding of the nature of the universe and of ourselves and our life within it. Throughout the whole process we are hampered by the fact that men can only see with the eyes and think with the minds of their own age and cultures. It is not only their opinions and judgments that are affected. Their actual observations of what exists and happens are coloured by their presuppositions, their expectations of what it is possible for them to be. Their minds can only take in the impressions that they are conditioned to receive. Advances are made when the eyes of some person or persons are opened to see through the veil of traditionally accepted presuppositions and catch a more accurate glimpse of the reality beneath. The history of human thought is thus the story of the successive stripping off of layers of misconceptions which veil the true nature of things from enquiring human minds.

We Christians begin our creed by affirming our faith in God as Creator of all things visible and invisible. For us, what the enquiring human minds are in search of is more accurate knowledge and deeper understanding of God's creation. It would be absurd to think that we can discover any truth about God behind his back, so to speak. We therefore have to accept all discoveries of the true nature of things as our receiving what God is revealing to us, made known to us in a fuller appreciation of his creative activity. Our trinitarian faith enables us to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the opening of the eyes of those who strip off this or that layer of misconception—in the discoveries, for example, of a Galileo, a Newton or an Einstein, a Lister or a Pasteur.

When we look back over this history of human thought we recognize the beginnings of our twentieth-century science and theology in primitive magic and religion. Both were attempts to get in touch with and, if possible, to influence whatever natural or supernatural forces were experienced as conditioning man's life on earth: weather which could favour their crops with the earlier and the latter rain or destroy them with devastating tornadoes; fire which could warm their bodies and cook their food or ruin them with consuming blaze; the mysterious sources of bodily health and vigour, of pestilence, wasting sickness, or sudden accidental death. At the

\*Inaugural Address for the Vacation Term for Biblical Study, Oxford University, July 31, 1966.

time, no doubt, magic and religion were confusedly intermingled. Looking back we can draw a clear distinction. Magic was men's attempt to control these forces by uttering the ritual words or performing the ceremonial acts which should compel them to do the magician's will. Religion was men's attempt to enter into personal relations with the all-powerful gods and goddesses, to ingratiate themselves with those inclined to be friendly and beneficent, to placate those likely to be malevolent and hostile. In magic (whether or no men thought of the elementary forces personally as gods or goddesses) the aim was to treat them as things to be brought under human control by learning the right technique. Throughout its development into the science of today this aim has remained constant. Progress has come through increasingly detailed knowledge of the statistically measurable regularities in the behaviour of these impersonal forces.

We here are concerned with the development of our theology out of primitive religion rather than with that of science out of magic. But it helps to keep in mind that in the history of human thought these two parallel developments have been going on together, and to ask whether for each there may not be something of value to be learned from the other.

In the earlier stages, before the distinction between the two could clearly be seen, there was a general belief that the knowledge men desired concerned two different fields. There was the knowledge to be gained by the use of human reason to observe and reflect upon the way in which things exist and happen in this world of space and time. But what about those mysterious unobservable forces through whose influence "the best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a'gley"? Here religious men and magicians were equally in the dark. There grew up among all the habit of depending on the authority of revelations given in the utterances of wise men credited with supernatural vision, or in time-honoured myths depicting the lives of gods and goddesses.

In a lecture given here in Oxford in 1945 Dr. Charles Raven described the coming of modern scientific theory as being due to a turning from dependence on the *dicta* of acknowledged authorities in the past to study of the *data* provided by the natural world in the present. He showed how modern zoology began when, instead of relying on Aristotelian and heraldic representations of animals in traditional bestiaries, men based their research on the observation of the actual nature and behaviour of living creatures. This was one of the turning-points in the story of how magic has become science.

Another thing which both the magicians and the religious had in common was the experience of these mysterious forces being both helpful and harmful. For the transition from magic to science this duality involved no difficulty of principle. It simply meant that since all things were to be studied and controlled, the aim must be to maximize the effects of the former and minimize those of the latter. But the theological development of religion was a very different story.

Religion was a matter of personal intercourse with gods and goddesses, of seeking the help of those believed to be beneficent and friendly as well as powerful, and of seeking to placate those who were to be feared as malevolent and hostile. In the history of our Christian faith the turning-point which marked the crossing of the line between superstition and the beginning of reasonable religion was the prophetic proclamation that there is only one all-powerful God, that he is good, that he is well disposed to his worshippers, and that he wills them to respond with similar goodness on their part.

This implies that the fundamental act of faith in God is for a man to try to do what he honestly believes to be the right thing in each situation and to trust God to support him in doing it. God is no longer the unknowable One whose mind and will can only be discovered by such means as casting lots or having a dream at a sanctuary. It is by the use of man's reason to examine the circumstances of the situation and ask what kind of action they call for on the part of a right-thinking man that he will open his mind to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the revelation of the will of God.

When we think it out, we see that this prophetic proclamation had a further implication and raised two questions.

*The Implication:* God uses our use of our own reason as a channel through which to reveal to us the content of his own mind and will. All human discovery of truth comes by the activity of the Holy Spirit opening our eyes to receive what God gives for us to learn. Thus, for example, he has used our scientific research to enable us to see his creative activity as evolutionary process. Thus he may use our psychological and sociological studies to induce a revision of some of our ethical judgments. In a word, all our secular studies have their theological implications. As we learn more about the nature of the universe which God is creating and of ourselves, his creatures, we are learning more about the mind and will of God himself.

*The Questions:* (i) If we say that God is good and calls for the response of similar goodness from his worshippers, what content of meaning can we give to the words "good" and "goodness" or the phrase "the right-thinking man"? We have to take into account the above implication of the prophetic principle in the sphere of ethics. As man passes from approval of the deceitfulness of Jacob to the standard of honesty required in Psalm 15, he deepens his understanding of what goodness means in both God and man. On this question the climax of the biblical revelation comes with the recognition of the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Of that, more anon.

(ii) The proclamation that there is but one God, the all-powerful Creator of all things, brings with it the inescapable problem of the existence of evil in the world of his creation. For light on this we have again to look forward from the prophets to the coming of Jesus Christ, in whom God

claims to take upon his own shoulders the responsibility for what he has allowed.

It would be absurd to expect the Hebrew prophets either to have realized the implications of their teaching as we can see them, or to have asked our questions. We have to relate our understanding of their thought to its historical setting. On this there are four things to be said.

1. Together with their contemporaries in the magic-to-science development they believed in the two fields of possible knowledge and the consequent need to depend on authoritative sources of revelation about matters beyond human ken. The mysterious nature of God, of his goodness, and of his will for man belonged to this field. The deuteronomic version of the teaching of Moses played for them the same part as the works of Aristotle for medieval zoologists.

2. For both the magicians and the religious the aim was to enlist the aid of the mysterious forces in the cause of their own welfare. The underlying motive was self-regarding. In the prophetic religion it was taken for granted that what man most needed was the grace and favour, and so the protection, of God; it was to secure this that to God's goodness he must make the response of similar goodness in his own life.

3. The relation of God to his worshippers was thought of as analogous to that of an earthly king to his subjects. Men must be loyally obedient to God's commands if they were to look to him for protection from their enemies and rescue from their ills. It must be remembered that this one all-powerful Creator-God now took the place of *all* the mysterious powers which swayed the destiny of human life, the hostile as well as the friendly. A place could be found for the hostility by seeing it as directed against the enemies of his chosen people and as expressed in the punishment of his subjects who were disloyal and disobedient.

4. While, consciously and overtly, the prophets' idea of the goodness of God was largely controlled by deference to the deuteronomic interpretation of Mosaic teaching, there is evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit guiding them along lines which have set us free from dependence on past authoritative judgments. I have already spoken of how Psalm 15 marks an advance in the idea of God's goodness from that implied in the Jacob stories. We can surely trace this liberating activity of the Spirit in Nathan's way of rebuking David about Bathsheba, in Elijah's rebuke to Ahab about Naboth, in what Elisha said to the King of Israel about the treatment of prisoners of war, and in much of the moral teaching of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea.

These are a few indications of the kind of questions which arise when we try to study the biblical writers in their place in the general history of human thought.

A few minutes ago I was describing the turning point that came in the transition from magic to science when zoologists turned from relying on

the works of such authorities as Aristotle to the study of their own observation of actual existing animals. I want now to maintain that, some three hundred years later, as a result of this last century's biblical studies, we are at a similar turning-point in the history of Christian theology. These studies have mainly been concerned with exegesis, that is to say, with attempts to discover the authorship and origin of the various books or parts of books, the historical circumstances in which they were produced, and what they must have meant to their authors and first readers. We now know a great deal more than our forefathers, not only about dates and origins, but also about what kind of people were these writers and the people they wrote about, what would have been their ways of thinking in their respective ages and cultures. We have not yet fully realized how radical a revolution this involves in our way of understanding the biblical revelation. A hundred years ago our forefathers looked to the Bible in the same way that medieval zoologists looked to Aristotle and heraldic bestiaries. To their successors' substituting of observation of actual animals corresponds our attention to the historical provenance of the biblical writings. But we have not yet shaken ourselves free from the habit of trying to look for our own guidance to some authoritative voice in the past. I can best establish this point by drawing my further illustrations from the study of the New Testament.

We have learned from the form critics that the books of the New Testament are *prima facie* evidence for what was thought and believed by the first Christians, that if we want to know the mind of Christ we have to see him through their eyes, discounting what is likely to have been due to their prejudices, presuppositions, or propagandist colouring.

Who were those first Christians? To begin with they were a group of Jews in Palestine who had followed Jesus of Nazareth in the hope that he might be the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies. Those hopes had been shattered by his arrest and crucifixion, but were revived by their conviction that he had risen from the dead. Their creed was the Jewish creed of their time and place, now enriched by the insertion of the belief that Jesus had been the Messiah after all, and was now alive again as their Lord and Master.

Theologically their first task was to relate this astounding new conviction to their existing Jewish beliefs, to see how each could help them to understand the other. In their messianic expectations there had been different schools of thought about the manner in which they would be fulfilled. These would have been in their minds as they tried to grasp the meaning of what had actually come to pass. There was at least one zealot among the original Twelve, and for him the news that Jesus was alive might have had the same sort of effect as if at a certain stage in the history of the Congo the news that Patrice Lumumba was alive again had inspired his fellow-Africans with new hope of victory over imperialism and colonialism. Was this the kind of hope that inspired the question whether this was the time at which

the risen Lord would restore the kingdom to Israel? How many of the surrounding populace, to whom they proclaimed that the risen Jesus had been and was the Messiah, would have taken it in this way?

It would throw a lot of light on the apostolic age if we could assume that the three thousand believers in Acts 2 and the five thousand in Acts 4 were a mixed company of Sadducaic political nationalists and Pharisaic liberal Jews. If there were grounds for suspecting the Christian sect of being politically dangerous it would explain their persecution by the Sadducaic rulers who feared lest disorder might threaten their good standing with their Roman overlords. I often wonder what kind of a *ménage* Ananias would have found in Straight Street, Damascus. Saul's host and hostess must have been like those Rhodesian African chiefs who work in with Ian Smith's government, and they found themselves entertaining the equivalent of a new convert to the nationalism of Albert Sithole and Joshua Nkomo. In Acts 21 the Roman commandant in Jerusalem assumed that as a Christian leader St. Paul was a leader of seditious rebels.

To think of the original Christian church as a mixed body of politically nationalist and spiritually religious Jews may possibly have some bearing on the vexed question of who were St. Paul's so-called "judaizing" opponents. However that may be, it is clear that by the time that the New Testament came to be written, Christianity had found its vocation to be a religious and not a political movement. This understanding of it was put into the sermon ascribed to St. Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. One cannot help wondering if this represented a victory of the Pharisaic over the Sadducaic element in the church and, if so, how far it was due to the fact that St. Paul was a Pharisee.

But it is time to be done with these speculations and to return to my main theme. I have said that for students of the Bible the attempt to see the books in their historical setting corresponds to the zoologists' observation of how animals actually behave. I have been trying to give some indications of what this means for the New Testament as well as for the prophetic writings in the Old.

The New Testament comes to us from some of the earliest believers in the messiahship of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. They were taking the first steps in the effort to explore the significance of that belief for our understanding of all things in heaven and earth, of God's will and way with his universe and with us men. The more we study what they say about their belief, the more we are impressed by the depth of their insight into the revelation of God in Christ, and by how much we have to learn from them. But what they had to say was the first and not the last word on the subject. They were initiating the theological research which has been going on ever since—which, for example, enabled their successors to see at Nicaea that Jesus could not have been the Messiah they believed in without having himself been God, and later that their experience of his genuine manhood involved all the perplexities of Chalcedon. But we

have no ground for supposing that they themselves asked, considered, and answered all the questions which were dealt with at Nicaea and Chalcedon, which have perplexed Christians down the ages, and which exercise our minds today. Their theology was the theology of the Judaism of their time; they thought about Jesus with minds conditioned by its traditions in the kind of historical circumstances at which we have been glancing. We here have to think with the minds of twentieth-century western Europeans, seeking to know what God is revealing to us of his will and purpose in creation and redemption through our scientific researches, including psychology and the social sciences. We have to ask how this may enrich our understanding of the revelation of God in Christ, as we study the witness borne to it by those who were his first believers.

This is why I said that we are at a turning-point in the history of Christian theology comparable to that of Dr. Raven's zoologists. For too long our biblical studies have been based on the assumption that the first Christians who wrote the New Testament had full knowledge of what Christianity truly is, that what we have to do is to find out what they thought and get back to it. I have read commentaries on the Pauline epistles, notably on Romans, clearly based on this assumption. I have read a book on the Apostolic Fathers criticizing them for having fallen away from St. Paul's full understanding of the true faith. But when we set the first Christians in their historical context, consider the kind of men they were and how they came to their beliefs, we see that to think in these terms is to depend on them in the same way as medieval scientists deferred to authoritative voices from the past.

What, then, are we to do? I suggest that we must make in our minds a clear distinction between two types of commentary and avoid causing confusion by mixing them up together. There is, first, the exegetical commentary. This is a matter of straightforward scholarship, the attempt, with the aid of textual, source, literary, and historical criticism, to determine what the works meant in the minds of their writers, they being the men they were with the outlook of their age and culture. Then there is what, for want of a better word, I will call the expository commentary. In this we start from the results of our exegetical study. This gives us their witness to what God was seeking to reveal to them through their understanding of his creative and redemptive activity. We have to examine their witness from the point of view of twentieth-century western Europeans, asking what God, through their testimony, is seeking to reveal of his mind and will for us today.

This is an exercise which demands something more than straightforward scholarship. We have to look to the Holy Spirit for nothing less than a gift of prophetic insight if we are to hear and understand what God is saying to us today, calling upon us to interpret what he has done in the past by the light of what he is teaching us in the present.

I will end with two illustrations of the kind of thing I have in mind.

The first is familiar to us all. In the second I am sailing into uncharted seas.

1. Our exegetical studies have shown us that on the question of the origin of this world the authors of the opening chapters of Genesis took for granted the mythology current among the people for whom they wrote and interpreted it by the light of the knowledge of God that had come to them through the insights of the Hebrew prophets. Our scientific research has given us a more accurate picture of how this earth and its inhabitants have actually come into existence. This for us takes the place of the mythology which the authors of Genesis had to interpret. In our expository work we have to interpret it by the light of the fuller revelation of God which has been given to us in Jesus Christ.

2. That fuller revelation has come to us through the witness of those first Christians. They interpreted it by the light of their inherited Jewish faith, with its belief that God's purpose was to deliver his chosen people from the miseries of this wicked world into a blessed immortality, and that the fundamental concern of the truly religious man should be for acceptance, in spite of his transgressions, into God's grace and favour. I personally am convinced that our exegetical studies show this to have been a misunderstanding of what Jesus himself stood for, and that the discovery of the fact requires of us a revision of our traditionally inherited ideas of what Christianity is and of how we should engage in the work of evangelism.

We are only just beginning to take seriously the fact that St. Paul and the other New Testament Christians were saying the first and not the last words about the content of Christian doctrine and ethics. This is the path along which our biblical studies will have to march from now on. Whither it will lead, we cannot predict in advance. As once God called on Abraham to go out not knowing whither he went, so now he calls on us to walk by faith and not by sight—by faith in his promise that the Holy Spirit will take of the things of Christ and declare them unto us. According to the best attested reading in John 14:4, our Lord assures us that it is not necessary for us to know where he is going in order to go with him. If we will bring the best resources of our brains and scholarship in all fields of learning to the study of his revelation of himself in the Bible, we shall find that he will be to us the way, the truth, and the life.